GOD AND ECOLOGY
Psalm 104 - Colossians 1: 13-20
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JANUARY 30, 1972

"The furnaces of Pittsburgh are cold; the assembly lines of Detroit are still. In Los Angeles, a few gaunt survivors of a plague desperately till freeway center strips, backyards and outlying fields, hoping to raise a subsistance crop. London's offices are dark, its docks deserted. In farm lands of the Ukraine, abandoned tractors litter the fields: there is no fuel for them. The waters of the Rhine, Nile and Yellow rivers reek with pollutants." (Time 1/24/72, P. 32)

Science fiction? Irresponsible scare rhertoric? Not really. Rather a direct quote from Time Magazine which was reporting a projection for disaster, based on a new sophisticated computer study of our ecological future. Wouldn't it be an ultimate kind of irony if the end of human history came, not in a fiery nuclear holocaust, not even in radiation poisoning as suggested in Neville Shute's "On the Beach", but in the total and utter disintegration of man's ability to live in relationship to nature? Wouldn't it be an ultimate irony if mankind - so fearful of the "Big Bang" actually terminated with a whimper?

Well, there is a growing number of experts who feel that this is precisely what is going to happen: that it is no longer a matter of debate: that the process of self-destruction is too far along to be reversed even if we wanted too, which we do not. There have, of course, always been "dooms-day merchants" - people whose greatest thrill in life is to scare the pants off someone else. My fifth-grade teacher was one of them, a gentle old lady whose day was incomplete until she had convinced us that there would probably be no tomorrow. The Russians had just exploded their first nuclear device and Miss Moan was totally convinced that the next one was aimed at Altoona, Pennsylvania. And by half past three every day I was in a state of total despair. Well, my parents got me through that one, but I've been most skeptical about scare tactics and fear merchants ever

since, including Billy Graham and Robert Welch and the ecology evangelists. Yet I feel myself coming around because the people telling us we are in serious trouble enviromentally are not irresponsible peddlers of fear: they have no hidden agenda, no personal gain in mind. They are, by and large highly esteemed men of science, industry and technology. And so I've begun to listen with a little more concern.

Now, every preacher worth his salt has been on the ecology band wagon at least once, except this one. I have made references to the topic, but never before an entire sermon and I'm not sure why, unless it has something to do with Miss Moan and my fifth grade distate for hysterical fear. This morning I invite you to think with me about God and Ecology - for I am becoming convinced that it is, in fact, the most serious concern confronting the human family today.

One of the problems in thinking about it, and discussing it, is that it is so large, so complex and so sophisticated that it boggles the mind. That, I believe, is part of the dilema. Men of average intelligence can't seem to find the handle. Men of reasonable good will can't seem to locate the real issue. Men of responsibility may want to do something, but feel that it has to be more than buying non-leaded gas. My expertise is very thin here. There are many of you who have a feel for the individual prescriptions - and I think you need to share them with all of us.

The pulpit issue - the issue which needs to be raised in the Church is this: out of scriptures and tradition do we have any wisdom to add to the debate? Does Christian Faith have anything to say to what is emerging as man's most urgent problem? The answer is yes - but not a simple one: not an easy one: rather one that goes all the way back to our basic theology, our concept of God: and one which will inevitably call into serious question the most sacred of American sacred cows.

A Christian and Bibilical concern for the ecology goes back to the basics - to the doctrine of creation. When we talk about God, from the

point of view of the Bible, we avoid long lists of adjectives. It is very natural to want to pin God down to a verbal formula, and much theology has been written with this in mind. Men have always wanted to know and to understand God, and when they sat down to define him, they piled together all the superlatives at their disposal. With the predictable result that God came out sounding like a super-man. The Bible, however, holds out for a God who is God - not a man: a God who is personal but not a person. In the Bible God is known by what he does and nowhere will we find a theological effort to contain him in a creed comprised of adjectives.

The Bible begins by affirming that God is Creator. Now, it has been observed that there is nothing unique about that; and that every world religion that formulates any kind of God begins with his creation of the world. The uniqueness of the Judéo Christian witness is not that God once created - but that he is still creating: it is still his world, his universe, and he is not done with it yet. Somehow that gets missed in the adolescent argument about whether or not Genesis 1 really tells it like it is. The point the Bible tries to make about God as creator, is that he has a permanent relationship with what he has created: that the processes by which things have come to be are his processes, including evolution.

Our view seems to be that God got it all started in the beginning: that creation was a once and for all event: that God made something called nature and then turned it over - lock,stock and barrel, to man. It's interesting that in Hebrew there is no word for nature - the Bibilical mind knew nothing of a natural order apart from the one who created and is creating it. To say "nature" in the Old Testament, a man simply said, "What God has made".

That intimate relationship between God and what he has made comes through clearly in Psalm 104, a Psalm which Professor Joseph Sittler calls an ecological doxology. In his words "Old Testament Man understood God's residency with the cattle on a thousand hills, and oil that maketh the

face of man to shine and wine that maketh glad his heart". God had done it all: God was doing it all: the whole earth was seen to be full of his glory, literally.

Part of our insensitivity is that we live several times removed from creation. "The cattle on a thousand hills, the oil to make the face shine, and wine to gladden the heart" have become for us a MacDonald's Cheeseburger, a tube of lipstick, and a can of Budweiser. And simple as it may sound I think the first thing our faith tells us, and the first thing we must learn is that even these - are the gracious gifts of a God who is part of his creation.

The Bible insists that God is creating the world: and a serious concern for ecology begins with a deepened sensitivity to that great truth. The second thing the doctrine of creation contains relative to ecology is the role of man in creation.

Ecologists adamantly point out that man's arrogance about the world is what got us into this mess in the first place. And sometry to lay the blame on the Judeo Christian tradition for teaching that man's first task is to be fruitful and multiply, and that the world is simply a big vegetable garden for mankind to exploit as necessary.

I take issue with that. If it is true it is because we have seriously misunderstood the Bible. For in the Bible God creates man as the final act, the final step - and plants indelibly in the heart of man his own image. Man is not just another animal - but the bearer of the image of God: the being created specifically by God to live in fellowship with him - and here comes the clincher - to be the manager, the trustee, the steward- the co-creator with God. That means that man must learn to live in harmony with the rest of the created order - but not passivly, not just as another animal: rather agressively, turning every skill, every technological sophistication to the task of managing the property over which we have been made trustees. That has a lot of implications: all the way from the

proposal to build the S.S.T. - which I sense will be resurrected in the near future in the name of employment and economic development: to the way you treat the part of creation encompassed by your own back yard.

That leads to the third understanding the Bible provides - the ethical one. Part of the reason we have polluted the air and water and landscape so badly is that we are a culture of individualists. Ethically we focus on individual behavior, and almost by nature are fearful of controls on corporate behavior. Example: you wouldn't dare collect your waste products and once a week dump them in the Wabash River - but a city can - or a corporation. You wouldn't dare dig a 50 foot hole in your front yard and than allow the foul run-off to kill all the vegetation in your neighbor's yards. But Coal Companies did it all over the mountains of Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

The Bible always sees morality on two levels - individual and corporate. The people sin in the old Testament: individuals are accountable - but so are nations. And it is time now for all of us to begin to bear responsibility for what is done in our name and for our sakes - whether by Standard Oil or the U.S. Government.

Finally, the Bible asserts that Jesus Christ is the Lord of Creation. I read this morning from the Letters to the Colossians. Listen again to how it talks about Jesus Christ. "His is the primacy over all created things... the whole universe has been created through him and for him...." That's strange theology for us. It's all through the New Testament letters - Christ's reigning over all creation: his supremacy over all powers: his Lordship over nature. But in Western Christendom Jesus Christ has been regarded primarily as a personal savior. More often than not the way of Christ has been portrayed as a way distinct and apart from the world. But the New Testament insists the reigning Lord, who is also our personal savior, is also in the business of reconciling, healing, bringing together the whole created order. That means that our behavior in relationship to the

environment has to do with our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Ecology - is a Christian concern.

We have a serious problem. In the words of the President of a major corporation: "We are all too familiar with the catalog of our dilemas: how our 20th century technology provides us with a once beautiful Cuyahoga River now so full of pollution that it catches fire and burns; of a society so affluent and so gorged with the collection of things that the sheer removal of trash becomes a crisis: of a society in which our chosen form of transport poisons the air: of a society characterized by urban sprawl with all its concomitant meanings in terms of the vulgar, the garish, the unplanned." (Lawrence G. Chait - Stewardship 1971, P. 46)

I have not gone into a long listing of the ways we violate creation. You know them: they are in the newspaper every night. What I have tried to do is bring to bear the resourses of scripture and tradition on the issue at the deepest possible level, for it is there that we will make the decisions necessary to survival. Change will happen in our society when it occurs first in the hearts and minds and behavior patterns of a lot of committed individual people. People, like you and I need to confront the obvious impossibility of continued industrial growth, and see that we have come of age - we are given in God's time to be the most important trustees creation has ever known. You and I, alone, can't alter the policies of the government or major corporations. But together - with others - we can. But it begins here, in the modest realm of our thoghts, our behavior, our theology.

There is more at stake, of course, than mere survival. What is really at stake is the quality of life it will be for us as we move through the years - and perhaps more important than that - the quality of life our children will experience and their children after them.

I would hope that 50 years from now - 100 years from now - they will be here, still breathing, still walking through clean white snow, still

laughing and loving and celebrating the goodness of the creative God. I would hope they will read

"Thou makest grass grow for the cattle.....
bringing bread out of the earth
and wine to gladden men's hearts,
oil to make their faces shine"

and know what that means.

That's what's at stake. AMEN

Father, help us to live responsibly: to reject that which is unnecessary and wasteful. Help us to be good stewards of the earth - so that our children and their children after them will know the goodness of your creation: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN